

ENERGIZING THE COMMITMENT TO CHILDREN*

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I READ A STATEMENT the other day by Bob Samuelson, the political economist in *Newsweek*, which I think is an important way to begin our discussions this morning. Samuelson said: "In case you hadn't noticed, we're receiving a massive political science lesson in how the world works—by crisis. We prefer to think that our system operates mainly on the basis of rational discussion and orderly action. Dream on everybody, dream on. The rule of reason is one of our comforting illusions. It is not the way of the world."¹

If that statement is true, the questions it raises for all of us are: How can we cope in a crisis-driven world? How can we gather our energies once again? How can we hold to our commitment to children? How can we avoid cynicism in the face of skewed priorities time and time again? And how can we deal here in New York City with just one more crisis? Where do we go from here?

I run a center focused on poor children in America, and I am tired of reciting problems. And believe it or not, even though statistics are one main area of the center's work, I am tired of numbers, because numbers mask the faces of real children and real families in this nation. What we have to do with the numbers, and the problems, is to look at them as a way to energize us, as a way to help us focus our energies and resources to make a difference in the lives of these children.

Problems are not really the issue. Our response can turn a problem into a solution, and a crisis into an opportunity. I think you may remember that back in 1937 President Franklin Roosevelt said something that I would like to remind us of this morning. He said, "I see millions of families trying to live on incomes so meager that the pall of family disaster hangs over them day by

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day. I see millions denied education, recreation, and the opportunity to better their lot and the lot of their children. I see one-third of the nation ill housed, ill clad and ill fed.”²

This sounds very familiar, doesn't it? That was 54 years ago. But Roosevelt and his administration responded to that crisis with what then seemed revolutionary solutions: Social Security, Aid to Families with Dependent Children, prenatal and child health clinics, and the WPA to develop jobs. The New Deal literally saved the country, and it laid the groundwork for the nation's social compact with its citizens.

President Johnson, three decades later, established the War on Poverty in the mid-1960s. The nation responded to widespread racial and economic inequities with such effective and lasting programs as Medicaid and Head Start, so ably lead by Dr. Julius Richmond. Now the question, 25 years later, is, what do we say? And more important, what do we do? We have obviously triumphed over bad conditions, hard times, and injustice in the past, and we continue to do so every day. We have managed miraculously not only to create but to maintain effective interventions against all odds to help children and families.

Even President Johnson recognized that the War on Poverty was just a start. The programs he rallied the nation around were never funded at levels to meet the need. I believe that a new day is dawning. I am truly an optimist.

I think that we are present at the birth of a new consensus for assistance to children. We have a long hard road ahead, and it is up to each and every one of us to mark the signposts to the future. We are all in this together, and this is no time to rehearse past wrongs. As my friend Dr. James Comer said to me when he began working with the New Haven schools to turn them around, “I went in there and I said to everyone, no one is to blame.”

Enough with the finger-pointing. We are all in this together. And each and every one of us wants to feel that we have given it our all.

What I shall talk about this morning is taking a giant step forward to push just that much harder, because unless we really dig in our heels for the long haul, no matter what our professional discipline, no matter what the color of our skin, we are not going to make it. And we are not going to make it without some personal sacrifice.

We must start looking at the needs of poor children and families through a new lens, and this will require much more flexibility and a collaborative spirit on the part of all of us. We must also believe in our power to change the course of events. I sometimes feel that a wave of apathy is breaking over my head, and over the heads of my colleagues. We get beaten down enough and

then we start to say, “Oh well, nothing can be done.” But a great deal is being done in many parts of this country, and I am energized by what I see happening in many cities in America.

I think right now of a young woman in Roanoke, Virginia. A program for children in that city is an inspiration, and speaks to the importance of private-public partnerships. Pediatricians have come together in a network to provide comprehensive primary health services for children on Medicaid, ably assisted by social workers, home visitors, and other professionals. A leading pediatrician in Virginia put together this network, and 28 out of the 30 pediatricians in the area signed on. Isn't that exciting? We need that kind of energizing example to move forward.

New Yorkers like me (I grew up in the Bronx and went to school in New York) really need to get out of New York, get refreshed, and come back ready to do battle. Because New York beats us down. The numbers are so big. Whoever heard of a city where 60% of the children are poor or near poor? That is not just a local, but a national disgrace.

Not enough of us are jumping up and down about it. We all ought to be jumping up and down about a statistic so devastating in its implications. We ought to be outraged. We ought to pin all of our elected officials to the wall and say this is clearly unacceptable. What specifically are you doing to help these children? We have been just too polite. We were all raised to be polite. But there are times when we must say, “We're mad, and we're not going to take it anymore.” And we haven't said that singly or collectively. We have just sat, being very polite.

~ I never thought the day would come when I would quote the following famous person. See if you can figure out who I'm talking about. This person said we must learn to “just say no.” I like it. It's part of the new consensus. We have to be able to take anything that seems to work from anybody. And so we must not look at who said it, but take that phrase, and take it for ourselves.

The child community is going to “just say no.” No more cuts in programs. No more children last, but children first. Clever people on Madison Avenue make hundreds of thousands of dollars taking phrases and making them household words. Our field needs this, too. We need a symbol. We need a rallying cry to bring together this nation so as to assure children healthy, productive lives.

And there are good things happening. Let me cite some examples. First of all, a few months ago the chief executive officers of several major Fortune 500 corporations testified in Washington to encourage more funding for WIC—the Special Supplemental Food Program for Women, Infants, and

Children. There they were in their Brooks Brothers suits and their striped ties, and they were saying we need more dollars for WIC.³ That's important. But we also need to know that the business community is going well beyond their statements, and now we need to start looking where they put their investments. Rhetoric is not enough. But words are powerful symbols, and we need to begin there. But I urge us to keep the words simple, even though the solutions may be complex.

Academics, of whom there are many in this room, tend to say everything in too complicated a fashion. A friend of mine in the business world said to me, "I want you to be able to tell me about your center and make believe the elevator door is going to close. It's taking you too long to get your message out. Learn to speak in sound bites." I am not being facetious when I say this. Simple statements can be very powerful. David Ellwood has been extraordinarily effective in influencing Congress and others to improve the Earned Income Tax credit by using three simple words—"Make work pay." Complex concepts need to be phrased simply. We need a memorable phrase for children in this country.

Another optimistic sign is that the most unlikely individuals are coming together on issues to help children and families. Phyllis Schlafly and Patricia Shroeder, while not literally at the same table, both support the importance of raising the income tax deduction for parents with children under the age of 18. This is a new consensus. Who would have thought that ideological biases could be put aside for something this important? And this type of new alliance is not the only unorthodox one that is apparent in this country. We have Orrin Hatch behind major new child care legislation along with Ted Kennedy. We need to pay attention to this kind of collaboration, and we can build on this national momentum.

We also need to remind each other that programs for families and children must go together. Three- and four-year-olds cannot manage on their own; there are no poor children—they have poor parents. Our center's publication *Five Million Children* stresses that we must view children within the context of families.⁴ Therefore, it is not possible, when talking about child health as we are this morning, to separate healthy children from healthy parents.

I recently testified at the request of the Select Committee on Children, Youth and Families about a number of promising programs for children around the country. People want to be energized. People are waiting to hear some good news. The bad news is too much of a "downer." We all need to be able to feel that at least some good things are happening in bad times. I think it was Wilbur Cohen who said, "Even in the worst times, in the most regressive political climate, progress can be made."

We shall have a chance to test it, that is clear. On the Select Committee, which is bipartisan, six new members had to be added because there was such interest in committee membership. And who are those six new members who wanted to be there? Republicans and Democrats, coming together. I think it is important for us to get rid of the constraints of political labels and to understand that some of the most exciting new ideas to benefit children and families in this country are coming from groups that are not necessarily from a more liberal tradition. They are also coming out of very conservative thinking.

Other efforts are afoot in Congress. One issue being debated is a form of child allowance in the United States, much like the allowance in other industrialized nations. Our center is now working with Irwin Garfinkel from Columbia University's School of Social Work. He is a social-worker-turned economist—which just goes to show us that when we stay in social services long enough we realize that we had better understand economics.

New child welfare legislation is also being developed that will probably be introduced by Senator Bentsen in the Senate and Representative Downey in the House. Both pieces of legislation will have a very heavy focus on prevention. Managed care legislation is also being discussed; it has just been introduced in our state. I hope that those in the audience who have raised questions about managed care will make their ideas known before full implementation. It's not enough to make a statement today. There is too much reaction to events and not enough proactive behavior from all of us.

It is very exciting to think of many of the changes underway that may succeed in improving access to health care in the United States during the next several years. My crystal ball may be cloudy, but during the next seven years I believe that we will see some dramatic changes. We will not duplicate the Canadian health system, and quite frankly, I do not think the Canadian model is for the United States. We have to realize that we are a very different nation. Most people who favor a Swedish health system do not want an extremely high tax rate. But if we really believe in such a system, it will mean putting our money where our mouths are.

We have to think very carefully about what we can personally tolerate, what we believe is important, and what can make a difference. But the bottom line is that we have to start saying everywhere that health care is a right, not a privilege. Something that clear. "Health care is a right, not a privilege." And I believe that with our strong and vocal support and encouragement, we can count on Congress to continue to stand up for children. And it is up to us to give Congress the information and support they need. In the 25 years since the War on Poverty, our knowledge base has grown dramatically. We really know a lot, and we know what works. We know, for example, that prenatal

care works; we know that high quality early childhood education works. What we have spent less time looking at is the institutional settings in which this care is given. How user-friendly are our services? How welcoming are our services to parents? How relevant are our interventions?

We do have the power to change a great deal in our current health system. We do have the power to change our hours of service. We do have the ability to expedite Medicaid services in our clinics. If we serve Latinos who speak only Spanish, we need a staff who can speak to them. The list could go on and on. Clients either come in through the outpatient prenatal clinics or they come in through the emergency rooms. How do we want it to happen?

We also know that primary health care for children really works. And I must confess that I feel hopeful about one very important thing that happened over the last two years in New York. In the previous administration, there was a Commission on the Future of Child Health. Dr. Robert Haggerty was on that commission, and I also served on the commission. And the good news is that there is now a successor group, CHAMP, ably lead by Dr. June Jackson Christmas. It is hard for the members of CHAMP now because things are difficult in New York. But one thing we New Yorkers know is how to hang in there in the hard times. I am beginning to think we invented the word "crisis." It is nothing new to us. And we know we shall overcome.

Another New York City initiative for children that sounds very exciting is the Children's Aid Society's new program in Washington Heights. This will be a collaboration between the Society, the New York City Board of Education, and Community District 6. They are planning comprehensive school-based clinics that include parent-support programs and medical and dental suites as well. Once again, this shows that even in bad times creative people do innovative and important things. Despite hard economic times, the school-based clinics that Columbia University's Center for Population and Family Health initiated four years ago in Washington Heights in the middle schools have now been expanded to four schools. And the private sector, critical in the development of these programs, provided planning funds that allowed time to create and to think anew. Private foundations do play an important role, but they cannot do it all.

Let me mention briefly what I think our priorities should be. I believe that nothing good happens in a vacuum. We have been too little concerned about how to change the environment in this country to support programs for children. There are wonderful "individual" groups, and that is the problem. They are unitary voices in a very noisy nation.

I believe that if we want government really to respond, we need a national organization in for the long haul. It should be outside government. It should

be independent. It should be a watchdog for children. It should monitor the progress this nation is making for children. We should copy an idea from Children Now in California and have a national report card on the well-being of children that can be monitored each and every year. We need to raise substantial funds from the private sector and the corporate sector and from individuals, even though we do not have the dollars individually to make the difference. And we need to focus on the media. The media still shape the way America thinks, whether we approve or not. It is time we move beyond the “public service announcement” approach. We have to learn to use the media day-in and day-out to deliver our message for children.

This new national bipartisan organization should include Republicans, conservatives, Democrats, business executives, physicians, and academics. And it should include the many service providers who have been out in the field and who understand the issues. It must have broad recognition and support across this nation. And we should even include a few Hollywood stars. We probably need—pardon the word—a promoter. This nation is known for it, but we are all embarrassed by the thought of promotion because we feel this is somehow not something that is really up to our standards.

But we have a hard sell ahead of us. A very hard sell, and a particularly hard sell when middle-class families are having a hard time economically. When we start talking about poor children, their eyes glaze over because their own children may be the poor children of tomorrow, even if only temporarily poor.

I believe that our major priority is broadening our ranks and airing our message. We cannot move our agenda unless we change how this country thinks about children. If we do not change the environment for children, we really will not move ahead. Improved understanding of how an issue is thought about leads to how we articulate what must be done.

We must also understand the need for better collaboration across disciplines. Educators may believe that health people cannot possibly know about early childhood education, and health providers may not understand how important education is for healthy development. But through working together, these relationships become very clear. Artificial distinctions between and among us do not help children. There are 13 million poor children in America, and five million of them are under the age of six. We need to use the good ideas of all disciplines if we are to address the multiple needs of these vulnerable children.

Let me add a thought about our own personal responsibilities. I believe truly that we cannot keep “putting it off” on somebody else to make a difference. If we lack the time or talent to work directly with children, then

we must contribute to groups that do, and make the extra effort. Because until we are willing to make that personal commitment, nothing will change.

I want to close with a comment I heard in San Diego last month at a program aptly named "New Beginnings." I learned that they spent two years to assure that education and social services can work together. The director had sent a memo to his staff that ended with a quote by Gabriella Mistral that many in this audience may know, but it should not be forgotten: "Many things that we need we can wait for. . .but not for the children. They cannot wait. Now is the moment in which their bones are formed, their intellect developed, and their social and emotional well-being established. We cannot answer them tomorrow. We have to answer them today."⁵

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